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Matthew 18:1-9, English Standard Version

18 *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* ² *And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them* ³ *and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* ⁴ *Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

⁵ *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,* ⁶ *but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

Matthew 18:21-35, English Standard Version

²¹ *Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”* ²² *Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

²³ *“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.* ²⁴ *When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.* ²⁵ *And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.* ²⁶ *So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’* ²⁷ *And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.* ²⁸ *But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’* ²⁹ *So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’* ³⁰ *He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt.* ³¹ *When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place.* ³² *Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.* ³³ *And should not you have had mercy on your fellow*

servant, as I had mercy on you?’³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

A millstone in Capernaum.

We’re continuing on from where we were last week. Jesus is in Capernaum, as you might recall. We’re in Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew, and Jesus is laying out some basic guidelines on how followers of his should live. The context is that there is a New Covenant now, and those who walk in the footsteps of Jesus are finding themselves in a vacuum. They are not controlled by Jewish law, but just what does it mean to be a Christian? In first the passage we just listened to, Jesus presents two guidelines. First, we should live in modesty, like children – not in an immature way, but in a humble way, for living like a child is very differently than being childish.

We’re going to look closely at the second lesson of our first passage, contained in verses 5 to 7, but first, let’s step back and look again at Capernaum, the city we considered last week. This is where Jesus moved to, after leaving his hometown of Nazareth in the wake of John the Baptist having been arrested. We remember that Capernaum is on the Sea of Galilee, on a major trade route that had once led the Assyrians to invade Israel so that they could control this highly valuable route that led from Egypt up through the Holy Land, and north into

the colonial empires of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. While Nazareth was off to the west, away from widely travelled roads, Capernaum was on a pathway of major international trade, a place where Jesus' message would quickly move to the far ends of the earth. Today, in 2019, the ruins of Capernaum still sit on the northern shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, and at the southern base of a large basalt rock outcropping.

This basalt, which proved critical to the economy of Capernaum, was the result of a series of extinct volcanoes that dotted the eastern shore of the Sea. This durable basalt was a fantastic building material, and the remains of ancient houses built with it still stand to this day. When this basalt finally does erode, it creates nutrient-rich soil perfect for growing crops. The area was known for producing first-rate grain. Capernaum wasn't a huge city, but it was a beautifully designed city, with a synagogue at its center. All major structures were built with this almost-black basalt. The basalt was also used to create long-lasting agricultural tools, and again, many ancient basalt tools still survive. These tools included olive presses, mortars, household grinding stones, and large industrial millstones. So many of these millstones survive, in fact, that they couldn't possibly have been built for local use: making millstones must have been a large local industry. We can assume that Capernaum was known for its giant millstones

and they probably were moved over great distances for resale after being purchased. Capernaum also had a big fishing industry, and the remains of at least eight piers, made of basalt, of course, can be found there today. So, fishing, farming, and manufacturing produced goods that left Capernaum and then traveled far to the south and north, and the east and west. There was one more important export of Capernaum, of course - and that was Christianity.

Let's zoom in on that middle part of our passage today, where Jesus creates one of his most memorable metaphors. This is what Jesus says: *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."*

This "great millstone" presumably refers to one of those industrial millstones that the area was so famous for exporting far and wide. Interestingly, the adjective great also means heavy, and the Greek word, onikos, actually means "having to do with a donkey", and it refers to the fact that donkeys were used to turn these giant millstones. Jesus says that rather than cause an innocent person to sin, it would be better to tie a giant millstone around your neck and jump into the Sea of Galilee. He thus forms a memorable metaphor by making use of the basalt millstones and the Sea which provided fish for food and water for farming. It was

a metaphor that would ring powerfully for ancient listeners of the Gospel of Matthew.

My father's name was Roger L'Heureux, at least originally. That's the name he was born with and the name he used when he served as a Marine Corps Sargent in World War II. After the war, he changed his name. Our family actually went through a few different names, finally ending up with King. But why did my father change his name? Well, to listen to him, it was because he was ashamed of his own father for running off and abandoning him and his mother when my father was a boy. My father simply did not want to have the name of a man who had walked away from his duty as a father. And my father didn't want his own children growing up with the name of a man who had left his family. In fact, my father's father didn't just run off. He didn't go and start a new happy life somewhere, free of the obligations of a husband and father. No, my father's father proceeded to leave the U.S., go back to French Canada, where he was from, and live on the street for decades. He never again had a permanent home or a real job. What he did was commit violent crimes, shaming his family - shaming my father who, as a boy growing up, kept hearing stories of his father's criminal acts. Even though my father was in Massachusetts and his father was in Quebec, relatives carried the stories back to Massachusetts, making my father all

too aware of just what his father was up to. That was why he changed our family name – because he was ashamed of his father who had run off and become a criminal.

But my mother had a different take on my father's father. She said that my grandfather, whose name was Earnest L'Heureux, served in the trenches in World War I, for a couple of years. At the time, my father was a very young boy living back home Massachusetts. Over and over, as my mother told it, my dad's dad took part in charges out of the trenches and saw all of the men to his left and his right get shot down – but somehow, he survived. The problem is that when he finally did come home from World War I he was very seriously mentally ill. He had been mentally ill, according to my mother, even before he went off to war, and what he witnessed pushed him way over the edge. In fact, my mother told me, my father's father, Earnest, ran off, not because he didn't want to be a husband and a father, but because he didn't want to bring his son down with him. My grandfather knew that he was spiraling out of control – and he felt that it was better for him to put a millstone around his neck and jump into the sea rather than to lead his son down the wrong path. He just didn't realize that even from far away, he would be impacting his son in a very negative way.

But could it be possible that my grandfather Earnest did the right thing by running off? Could my father have ended up mimicking his father's criminal behavior if my dad had grown up with his father? I honestly don't know. But my mother was at least convinced that his son's best interests were in my grandfather's heart. That's the critical thing for me. My grandfather was trying to do what was best.

Years later, when I was a grown man and my father was near the end of his life, I asked him about his father – who had died on the street in Quebec when I was boy growing up in L.A. I asked him if he realized that his father was simply sick, that there was no reason to be ashamed of him. I asked him if he realized that his father never meant to do his son and his wife any harm, that he apparently left because he didn't want to expose his son to the man he had become. Now, as we talked, my father and I were doing what people in L.A. do: we were driving down the freeway late at night. I was behind the wheel. I remember my father lighting a cigarette. My father had always been an extremely strong, tough man. But when he turned to face me, I saw that his eyes were wet. He said that the last straw was when he, my father, came home from World War II just fine. That was when he finally decided that he couldn't forgive his father for not coming home from war and then being a husband and father.

My dad said that he decided that his father had no excuse, because my father managed to go through a war and come home okay. But then my dad shook his head, and I knew what he was thinking, even though he never said it: yes, his father was simply sick. That's all it was.

That night on the freeway, I didn't think of this metaphor of Jesus'. I didn't tell my father that his dad had decided it was better to put a millstone around his neck and jump into the Galilee, just like Jesus said. But that's what had happened, at least in my grandfather's mind.

This brings us to our second quote, which is straightforward. In it, a master forgives a huge debt owed by a servant when the servant begs for mercy. But when that same servant refuses to forgive a tiny debt owed by a fellow servant, the master comes back and has the first servant tossed in jail. This is an intriguing passage, because it doesn't just say that we must forgive. It seems to say that God will forgive us only if we forgive others. In other words, God's forgiveness is *not* unconditional. For us to be forgiven, we must pass it on. To be honest, I read this a little differently. I take this parable to mean that our ability to forgive minor offenses is nothing compared to God's ability to forgive absolutely everything – and this should humble us into forgiving others for minor earthly offenses.

There's another way of looking at this, though. Our reflex should always be to forgive, because we often don't see the bigger context. God sees it, though. My father couldn't forgive his father because my dad couldn't see the big picture. He didn't know that there wasn't actually much to forgive. His father had been guilty of something far more minor than my dad had realized.

So, that's what I propose to you. If there is someone in your past whom you think wronged you, consider giving them a call. Don't even assume you have much to forgive. You don't know their perspective. You don't know God's perspective. We see things through a very narrow lens, and this leads us to a lot of misunderstandings, between us and fellow humans, and between us and God. Our reflex should always be to forgive, because that is what Jesus taught us, and because that is the best way to be humble in the eyes of an all-forgiving God. Showing those around us how to live with humility is also the best way to guide people on the path toward God. Amen.